

How Greek Sceptics argued for and against the gods

Shaul Tor

Discussions of the ‘argument from evil’ against the existence of God and the ‘argument from design’ for God’s existence most visibly belong today either to religious studies lessons or to heated television debates between fervent believers in God and fervent atheists. But, as Shaul Tor shows here, there was in antiquity a rather different group of people who were interested in refining and evaluating such arguments: philosophers who did their best to believe as little as possible, one way or the other. These ancient philosophers were systematically sceptical: they refused to accept a claim if they saw a way to counterbalance it with an opposite claim of equal strength. And they extended their sceptical inquiries even to the sensitive question of the nature and existence of God.

A modern philosopher is not very likely to tell you that she is a Sceptic, and that you might wish to become one too. The ancient world, by contrast, confronts us with a variety of living, breathing, radical Sceptics. These ancient Sceptics do indeed want to suggest to you that their Scepticism – their systematic refusal to accept dogmatic beliefs or, indeed, *any* beliefs at all – is not just a viable philosophical attitude: it could even be the best way for you to live your life.

Might there be any attraction – or some bite – in this ancient appeal to Scepticism? How do the ancient Sceptics recommend to us a life without beliefs, and how might we, today, engage with the strengths, weaknesses, insight, and ingenuity of their approach? What, in particular, happens when our conversation with these bold Sceptics turns to the crucial and sensitive topic of the nature and existence of god?

Pyrrhonian Scepticism: the key principles

We will focus here on what is perhaps the most famous – or notorious – ancient School of Scepticism: Pyrrhonian Scepticism. The ‘Pyrrhonists’ named themselves after Pyrrho of Elis, a purported paragon of suspension-of-judgement and tranquillity, who died around 270 B.C., some two hundred years before the formation of the School which took its name from him. Most of our

evidence for Pyrrhonian Scepticism comes from Sextus Empiricus, a Pyrrhonist of the second century A.D. Sextus was also (as his cognomen ‘Empiricus’ suggests) a medical doctor of the ancient ‘Empirical’ School of medicine. Two different works by Sextus survive, the shorter and more elegant *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and the longer and more detailed *Against the Learners*.

To put it simply, the Pyrrhonian Sceptics want us to see that there are two (or more!) sides to every dispute. Sextus uses the example of honey. Honey tastes sweet to healthy people, but bitter to ill people. On the face of it, there is no obvious reason to privilege healthy people over ill people (or *vice versa*) as a better source of information concerning the true nature of honey. What we have here, then, are two competing perspectives and no non-arbitrary way to choose between them. Therefore, and in that sense, these two competing perspectives are equipollent: of equal strength. Once we recognize the dispute between these two competing and equipollent perspectives, we are brought to suspension-of-judgement: we are forced to suspend our judgement over whether honey really is, in its own nature, sweet (as it appears to healthy people) or bitter (as it appears to ill people) or neither (*Outlines* 1.1–20).

The Pyrrhonists did not stop with honey. They persistently pursued questions fundamental to our world-view: ‘Is there such a thing as “time”?’; ‘Is incest

wrong?’; ‘Is there a god and is he providential?’, etc., etc. They gathered and devised sophisticated arguments on both sides of every question to show that, in each instance, competing and equipollent cases can be made from competing and equipollent perspectives. Do you feel more inclined to assert that there is an *equal* or an *odd* number of grains of sand in the world? The Pyrrhonists want to make us feel similarly undecided between competing alternatives concerning all those fundamental questions.

The Pyrrhonists not only suggest that an honest, rigorous, and fundamental examination of questions appears to bring us to suspension-of-judgement. They also report the experience that, by arriving at suspension-of-judgement on all these fundamental questions, they have finally found *tranquillity* and *peace* (or as much tranquillity and peace as humans can find). Sextus, remember, was also a medical doctor. He draws an analogy between administering drugs to patients and administering Sceptical arguments to people who suffer from the obsessive, anxiety-generating, dogmatic impulse to determine the true nature of things (*Outlines* 1.25–30, 3.280–1).

But how, once we have suspended judgement, can we get on with everyday life? The dogmatic opponents of Scepticism questioned whether a life without beliefs was in fact possible. They told (or invented) stories about how Pyrrho of Elis only got through each day because his *non*-Sceptical friends – who *did* accept beliefs – were kind enough to steer him away from cliffs and oncoming carts. But the Pyrrhonists retorted that it was perfectly possible to act on the basis of how things involuntarily *appear* to us, without committing ourselves further to the belief that those things actually are as they appear to us and independently of appearing so to us. I must act, one way or another. And so I will act on the basis of the fact that it appears to me that, for example, honey is sweet, there is a cliff over there, and incest is wrong. But I will not commit myself further to the claim that all those things are, in themselves, just as they appear to me and independently of appearing so to me (*Outlines* 1.21–4).

Arguing for the gods

Let's consider, then, some of the arguments which Sextus advances in order to construct competing cases of equal strength – and so as to bring us to suspension-of-judgement – concerning the existence and nature of god. Some of these arguments are quite specific to ancient Greek religious thought and practice. Others represent potent early expressions of arguments which later became – and still now remain – key controversial questions in debates about the existence and nature of god.

One consideration which Sextus raises is the sheer *persistence* and near universality of the belief that gods exist and are providential (*Learners* 9.61–74). Nearly everybody, Sextus reports, believes this. The very persistence and apparent irresistibility of this belief, Sextus suggests, may well seem to speak in its favour, even if we couldn't pinpoint what accounts for this persistence and apparent irresistibility.

Sextus advances a forceful version of what came to be known as the Argument from Design (*Learners* 9.75–6, 111–14). Matter does not itself possess the capacity to organize itself. Thus, when we observe the order, beauty and functionality of the world around us, we are led to infer the existence of a designer, who endowed matter with those properties. Sextus compares how, when observing a bronze statue, we immediately infer the existence of a sculptor. Modern versions of the Argument from Design stress that certain physical conditions are very *precisely* suitable for the emergence and preservation of life (these are sometimes dubbed 'Fine-Tuning' or 'Goldilocks' arguments). So, for example, if gravity was just a *little* bit stronger or weaker than it is, then life-sustaining stars like our sun could not exist. One objection which opponents of such arguments raise is the following: if it is felt to be improbable to posit the un-designed existence of such ordered conditions, might it not, then, be at least equally improbable to posit the un-designed existence of a designer (or 'sculptor') *capable* of designing those ordered conditions?

Democritus' theory of atoms proffered one ancient alternative to design. Given an infinite number of atoms of infinitely many shapes, joining together in every possible way in infinite space and infinite time, there were bound to be *some* worlds (among innumerable others) that generated the sort of order we see about us. (From here, one might get to what some philosophers call the 'Anthropic Principle': we, as intelligent creatures capable of raising all these questions, could of course only have emerged in one of those ordered worlds!) But this idea, that the precisely fine-tuned and remark-

ably design-like features of the world necessitate the existence of a designer, still strikes many thinkers as compelling. Sextus does not himself directly criticize the Argument from Design. He advances it alongside the other theistic arguments, only to counterbalance them all later with the arguments against the gods.

Sextus concludes the case for the gods by recounting the following argument from the Stoic philosopher Zeno of Citium (*Learners* 9.133–6):

- 1 It is reasonable to worship the gods;
- 2 It is not reasonable to worship those who do not exist;
- 3 Therefore, the gods exist.

Now, at first blush, this might seem a remarkably weak argument. It might seem that, by starting with the assumption that it is reasonable to worship the gods, Zeno simply assumes what needs to be shown: i.e. that there exist gods, who have the sort of providential nature which makes it reasonable to worship them.

One possibility, though, is that this is one of those cases in which we might achieve a more sympathetic evaluation of the argument's appeal if we consider the cultural and religious context in which it was advanced. It was a central feature of ancient Greek tradition and thinking that worship of the gods was causally linked to subsequent benefits. Sacrifice seemed, at least often, to work. Equally, personal and civic calamities were frequently associated with a failure to sacrifice. In this context, the efficacy of worship may well seem to be a plausible thing to assume. And, once we assume that worship is efficacious – and, therefore, a reasonable thing to do (step 1) – we quickly arrive (through steps 2 and 3) at the existence of (providential) gods. (The later Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus, expressed an even more concise version of the argument: 'there are altars. Therefore, there are gods.')

Arguing against the gods

The first question which Sextus raises here is whether we even know what we *mean* when we speak of 'god'. The theologians of Sextus' day disagreed on such fundamental questions as, for example, whether god is corporeal or incorporeal, internal or external to the world, providential or inactive. But, if we cannot even agree on the most basic characteristics of this supposed entity, how can we begin to evaluate reasons for and against its existence? (*Outlines* 3.3–5).

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that we can agree on a coherent conception of god, Sextus proceeds to advance what has come to be known as the Problem of Evil (*Outlines* 3.9–12). The world, Sextus tersely observes, is full of evil. We might think, for example, of a particular

case of an innocent third-world child undergoing, through both natural circumstances and human injustice, acute and ultimately terminal suffering. Such evil patently goes on. What follows concerning the nature of god? Sextus outlines four options:

- 1 God wishes and is able to prevent such evil;
- 2 God wishes but is not able;
- 3 God does not wish, even though he is able;
- 4 God neither wishes nor is able.

If 1 is right, what explains the existence of such cases of evil? If 2 is right, then god would be weaker than whatever it is that stops him from preventing a particular case of evil. But it is contrary to nearly everybody's conception of god to think of him as weaker in this way. If 3 is right, then god would himself be evil. This is, again, contrary to nearly every conception of god. If 4 is right, then god would be both weak and evil. Sextus concludes by remarking that, if we cannot tenably maintain that god is providential, then we no longer have any real motivation to posit a god at all.

As with the Argument from Design, philosophers and theologians are, to this day, engaged in intense disputes over the strengths and weaknesses of the argument from the Problem of Evil. The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus took the problem head on. Among other things, Chrysippus argued that *good* is nothing other than the opposite of *evil* and the removal of *evil* (equally, *justice* is simply the opposite and removal of *injustice*, etc.). Nothing, therefore, could be good or just, or be perceived and experienced as good or just, if the world did not *also* contain their opposites: evil and injustice, perceived and experienced as evil and injustice.

Does god know what it's like to have a cold, or to stub a toe? Presumably, if god is to know all things, then he will also have knowledge of suffering (Sextus' own example is gout). But surely god doesn't *suffer*. Indeed, it would seem to be only *vulnerable* and *destructible* things which know what it is like to have a cold, stub a toe, or suffer from gout. Does it follow, then, that we know things of which god himself is ignorant? That doesn't sound right either. This argument might seem silly, but there is perhaps a serious theological challenge here: can god be both all-knowing and utterly blissful? (*Learners* 9.162–6, cf. 138–41).

Sceptical piety?

Sextus develops many other clever and intriguing arguments both for and against the gods. I hope, however, that we've had some taste of the Pyrrhonian medicine!

The Pyrrhonists, then, did not shy away from the sensitive topic of the existence

and nature of god. In closing, however, it is worth noting the distinctive and unusual way in which Sextus introduces his discussion of the gods (*Outlines* 3.2, *Learners* 9.49). Sextus is, in fact, keen to stipulate in advance that the Sceptics, following ordinary life, do say that the gods exist (although they do so ‘undogmatically’: *adoxastôs*), and they do worship the gods in the standard ways.

Has Sextus chickened out? Are these prefatory caveats simply inconsistent with the Pyrrhonian project of bringing us to *suspend our judgement* over whether or not gods exist? Many commentators think so. Can we say anything in Sextus’ defence here? We might argue that, in issuing these prefatory remarks, Sextus is actually doing nothing more than reporting how things involuntarily strike him, just as he did in the case of honey. It appears to Sextus that honey is sweet, that there is a cliff over there, and that there are gods. In his everyday life, Sextus will, therefore, act on the basis of all those appearances. But he will do so ‘undogmatically’: that is, he will not commit himself further to the belief that all those things *are* as they appear to him, and independently of appearing so to him.

Well, you may or may not think that this line of defence could work. Either way, the fact that Sextus feels the need to make these prefatory caveats underscores the social risks that were involved in questioning the existence of gods. It also underscores the stubborn determination of the ancient Sceptics, who questioned it nonetheless.

Shaul Tor teaches in the Classics and Philosophy departments at King’s College London.

If Scepticism has got you intrigued and you want to explore further the Pyrrhonian discussion of the gods, see: B. Inwood and L. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis, 1997), pp. 362–73. To explore Pyrrhonian Scepticism more generally, see: J. Annas and J. Barnes, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 2000).